

can't wait to get back home to his wife and family. And to his collie, who smells pretty gamy when he's wet. He asks the student if he could stand some food. The student says he isn't really hungry, but something in his voice is askew. The salesman pulls in at a truck stop. At the counter, he orders three hamburgers and two chocolate milkshakes. When the waitress brings them, the salesman sets the double platter in front of the student. The student says, Thanks, but I can't accept this, I can't pay. The salesman smiles broadly and says, This is America, so I guess even a college boy has a right to be rock-bottom stupid if he wants to. But if you pass out or maybe even die on me, I'll be late getting home. So if you want to ride with me, eat those burgers. The second shake is optional. I'll drink it, if you decide you don't want it. The boy eats and drinks, and is pensive.

AFTER SCHOOL, WALKING HOME

A hot West Texas afternoon, almost summer. Two or three children stand near the porch of a white frame house. Book-satchels hang before them in their hands. There in the open sun a white bulldog lies prone, his stubby legs splayed and flat against the ground. A short chain is fastened to his studded collar at one end and at the other to an iron stake. No grass grows in his worn circle of dust and sand. His square jaws grasp the side of the neck of a large, loose-skinned mongrel. This dog has been made to lie with his muzzle pressed against the sand. He whimpers occasionally but no longer tries to struggle. Every minute or so, the bulldog seems to relax his jaws but instantly reclinches them, gathering in more of the folded skin. His indifferent eyes are bordered with pink flesh. Blood thickens on the mongrel's coat around the bulldog's mouth. The mongrel cannot move his head. His eyes close and open slowly, looking first at one child, then another. His whimpering is the only sound. No grownups are in sight. Not wanting to, the children watch.

— Jim Linebarger

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